

Delayed Fuse

A Short
Short Story

By
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"I GOT you covered, Sheriff. I don't want to shoot less'n I have to, but I ain't goin' to be took."

The voice was Len Bassett's. It came from inside the old farmhouse on the hilltop.

Sheriff Cuyler, halfway out of the old flivver in which he had just arrived, paused. His deputy, Dave Morgan, seated back of the steering wheel, spoke a warning:

"Careful, Sheriff. He's dangerous."

"No call for you to use a gun on me, Len," the sheriff called out. "Nobody's wantin' to take you. I just drove up to find out what happened 'tween you an' Jimmy Blodgett."

There was a little period of silence. Then, "What's Blodgett say?" the voice from the house asked.

"Old Doc Gardner's patchin' him up, an' he won't leave me talk to him yet," the sheriff explained. "Doc give him some stuff to put him to sleep, an' he says he won't be set to talk 'fore maybe tomorrow mornin'. I thought maybe you'd like a chance to tell your side o' the story while we're waitin' around to hear his."

"How come you figure I'm mixed up with Jimmy Blodgett?" the man inside the house asked suspiciously.

"Jimmy claimed 'twas you he was fightin' with," the sheriff explained. "He was kinda wobbly an' out o' his head, so they didn't get much details."

Another short period of silence. Then the front door was swung open, and Len Bassett came forth, a rifle in his hands. He was a tall, rawboned, large-featured man in his early thirties. He stared at the sheriff suspiciously.

"Jimmy bunged up much?" he asked.

The sheriff chuckled and spat. "I wouldn't say 's you done him much good,

Len," he said, "but most of him'll be there when he heals up, I reckon."

A reluctant grin creased Bassett's big features. He leaned his rifle against the house and crossed the yard to the fence. "He jumped me," he said abruptly.

"Yeah? How come?"

Bassett shrugged. "Me an' Clara was pretty good friends," he explained. "She married Jimmy, but before he come— You know how it was. We kep' company considerable, an' I wouldn't wonder if he's heard talk. I was drivin' back from town las' night around near dark, an' jus' this side o' his place he come up alongside, an' all of a sudden he cussed and grabbed me. I wasn't lookin' for nothin' like that, an' he pulled me off onto the road. Acted kind o' crazy. Cussin' me an' tellin' me he was goin' to kill me an' all like that. I lit into him then an' smacked him down. I give him a pretty good goin' over when I got started 'cause the way he talked I didn't know if he had a gun or knife or what. Finally he went down an' stayed down, an' I jus' clumb into my rig and drove off. I s'pose I should 'a' brought him around an' took him home to get fixed up, but I was all riled by then an' I didn't give a hoot if he laid there or not."

The front door was swung open and Len Bassett came forth, a rifle in his hands. "Jimmy bunged up much?" he asked

"Must 'a' been kind o' crazy to jump you, Len," the sheriff said. "Ought to had sense enough to know you'd spread him around."

"Sure," Bassett agreed. "That's the way he acted. Crazy. Made me mad. "Make anybody mad."

"Can't blame me for smackin' him, can you?"

"Not a mite," the sheriff admitted. He narrowed his eyes and chewed thoughtfully for a moment.

"I'll make a dicker with you, Len," he offered at length. "Don't want to put you to any more trouble'n I have to. S'pose'n you just stay home here till tomorrow, or mebbe the day after, till I get a chance to talk to Jimmy an' see what he figures to do. I'll tell him your side o' the story an' he'll most likely be glad to leave the matter drop."

"Stay home!" Len exclaimed. "What's the idea in that?"

"The word's around more or less that you was the one beat Jimmy up," the sheriff explained. "Some o' his friends are liable to wonder why I don't bring you in, an' if you're seen around, why, that'll just start 'em naggin' at me. If Jimmy decides to swear out a warrant ag'in you for assault an' battery or somethin' like that, why, of course, I'll have to come out an' serve it on you."

"Guess my word's as good as his," Bassett sneered. "He jumped me, an' I defended myself."

"I'm just tryin' to make it easy for both of us," the sheriff explained mildly. "If Jimmy don't want to bring a charge ag'in you, that's the end o' the thing."

"All right," Bassett agreed. "I'd just as lief stay home, anyhow."

"May be up some time tomorrow," the sheriff called as the deputy saw-sawed the car around preparatory to starting down the mountain.

"I'll be waitin' for you," Bassett called back.

At ten o'clock the next morning the sheriff and Morgan again drove up the mountain to the remote upland farm

where Bassett dwelt alone. Len came forth in his shirt sleeves to greet them.

"Had a long talk with Jimmy this mornin', Len," the sheriff said.

Bassett's eyes narrowed. "How is he?" he asked.

The sheriff chuckled. "Kind o' disturbed around the whiskers, I reckon," he said. "His nose is busted, an' he's got a black eye that ought to be put into alcohol an' sent to a museum some place. Doggonedest shiner I ever see! You certainly can smack, Len!"

Bassett grinned. "What's he say?" he asked.

"He tells a little bit different story 'n you do, Len," the sheriff said. "He claims he was comin' home along the road from puttin' the cows out to pasture in that west eighty o' his an' that you laid for him an' jumped him."

A deep flush spread slowly over Bassett's hard face. His jaws set. The cords in his neck swelled.

"I did jump him," he declared savagely. "Long's he's only got a black eye an' a busted nose out of it, I don't care who knows it. I want folks to know it. I want 'em to know I don't set quiet an' do nothin' when a young squirt like Jim Blodgett moves into the neighborhood an' makes off with the gal I'm aimin' to marry. I lied to you yesterday 'cause when I seen you comin' I was scared maybe I'd overroughed him an' he'd gone an' died on me."

The sheriff nodded. "I kinda suspi-cioned that's about how it was," he said mildly. His right hand dropped to his hip and came away filled with a gun butt.

"Steady, Len!" he warned. "No monkey business. Jim Blodgett was deader 'n a mackerel when his wife went to look for him an' found him alongside the road. I figured it was you done it, but we might 'a' had a mess o' trouble provin' the truth, an' this county ain't got any money to waste payin' for long-drawn-out court squabbles over a skunk like you. All right, Dave. Clif him up an' let's get goin'."

Illustrated by
JOHN
ALAN
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The sheriff chuckled. "I wouldn't say 's you done him much good, Len"